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Paintings of

# Indian Womanhood

By

S.G. THAKUR SINGH

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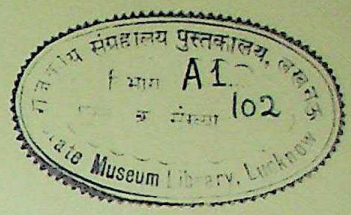


*Paintings of*

# Indian Womanhood

*By*

## S. G. THAKUR SINGH

*With a foreword by*

**J. P. Gangooly**

*Introduction & notes by*

PRINCIPAL SHAMSHER SINGH M. A.

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# FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION to the paintings of Mr. Thakur Singh is superfluous. They are already well-known in India for cleanliness of treatment and breath of atmospheric effects together with a combination of style peculiar to his own. Perhaps this is due to the clear atmospheric conditions and bright surroundings of the Punjab, the land of his birth. The environment of childhood has, to a great extent, played an important part in the formation of a personality in his art which has attracted attention, so richly deserved.

Mr. Thakur Singh's recent efforts in Figure Subjects, a selection of which is reproduced, here are the best of his works in the medium which he has made pre-eminently his own; and every phase of the artist's development is strongly represented. There is a certain natural grace about his figure paintings which can hardly be found in the works of his brother artists of the day, thus giving his art a distinct feature, uncontaminated with outside influence of his contemporaries.

His effort to bring his art within the reach of all by this small publication ought to meet with every response from the public and stimulate other publications of similar nature.

J. P. Gangooly,
*Principal,*
GOVT. SCHOOL OF ARTS, CALCUTTA.

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# INTRODUCTION

BY

*Principal Shamsher Singh M.A.*

CERTAIN great men are associated in our mind as embodiments of typical qualities. Some are known by their inherent grandeur of character; some by their spirit of humanity and good nature; and others by their lofty wisdom. But the name of S. G. Thakur Singh evokes other images than these. It brings up before us a warm, emotional temprament, an unassuming demeanour and transparent sincerity. The unique recognition and fame that years have brought him, have not made him forget his humble beginnings and the toil and tribulation of his early days when he had to work incessantly even for bare subsistence. He had to wade through deep waters, but he seems to have come out on the other shore unscathed, and at peace with himself and his surroundings. And the serenity of mind and inner equilibrium he has thus achieved after life's strenuons toil, has imperceptibly passed into his creative work. Whether he paints in pastel colours the shy smiles of an innocent girl; or the dignified demeanour of Netaji Bose or General Hari Singh Nalwa; or the silent, sunny vales of Gulmarg; or the waves playing in childlike intimacy with the shore — the same tranquil beauty enlivens them all.

S. G. Thakur Singh took initiation in art at a comparatively early age of ten by drawing mural sketches on the mud walls of his ancestral home at Verka, a suburban village of Amritsar. He had to wage a lone battle to enter into the citadel of recognition. Knowing as he did by instinct the field where his genius was to find its ultimate fulfilment, he rejected engineering as a career chosen for him by his parents; and, accompanied by Mohammed Alam, an artist of his native place, he took his way to Bombay where he made a sensational debut into the art world by capturing the first prize in the Simla Art Exhibition for his brilliantly executed sea-scape "Early Morning on Sea Beach."

From Bombay he moved to Calcutta – the home of renascent art – where he spent seventeen years of his fruitful career in single-minded devotion to art. Here he cultivated intimate friendship with eminent artists like Abanindranath, J. P. Gangooly,

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H. Mazumdar and others who lavished high encomiums on the wonderful executions of his brush. So widespread was the spell of his genius in the art-world that it occasioned very little surprise when he annexed the second prize in the British Empire Exhibition, held in London in 1924, for his masterly painting "After Bath" (Plate 12) remarkable for its glowing realism, choice of colour, and sensuous appeal of the feminine figure. His "Ganesh Puja" (Plate 10) was an object of attraction in the Exhibition of Modern Indian Art, opened by the Duchess of York in December 1934 in the New Burlington Galleries, London.

Towards the middle of 1935 he organised Punjab Fine Arts Association which was responsible for publishing his selected works in three volumes under the caption "The Art of S. G. Thakur Singh" and another art album entitled "Glimpses of India", a composite of scenic and architectural beauties of India.

A few months later, he returned to the Punjab and settled down permanently at Amritsar where ever since he has been associating with the activities of the Indian Academy of Fine Arts of which he was elected President with unanimous verdict. Under his brilliant lead, for over quarter of a century, this organisation has been doing a wonderful piece of work in setting up æsthetic standards and popularising art in Northern India with almost a fanatic zeal. S. G. Thakur Singh believes that unless art becomes an integral part of common man's life true progress can not be achieved however much we might excel others in economic self-sufficiency or political sagacity. Thus it is his mission to make this country art-conscious like European countries of today and towards this end he has been working with ceaseless endeavour.

The technique of Thakur Singh has derived its ingredients from European tradition, but this it has done without detriment to the age-long traditions of his own country's art. Now-a-days when sheer academic jugglery in colour, light and shade is being practised under new nomenclatures and styles, it is refreshing to find in this great artist's brush stress on the old and eternal values of beauty. He has no patience with evanscent schools or styles of art which take fiendish delight in distorting beauty out of shape in order to appear novel or bizarre. His art is at once a reminder and a warning to those claptrap, ultra-modernists who, with so little work and still less patience, try to slink into the envied Temple of Fame through the postern door to take seat there with the Immortals, like Satan stealing into the sacred precincts of paradise, and win cheaply a name which alone is granted to martyrs in a cause.

S. G. Thakur Singh believes in going direct to nature for subject or inspiration. But he does not accept nature in her wild exuberance or superfluous abundance.

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He reduces her to strict order and coherence, for art to him is 'nature methodised'. This is why there is, in his works, an eternal freshness of appeal, a deep intuitive understanding and a breadth of vision—all balanced by a perfect technique. He speaks poorly of that art which cries hoarse for a critic to deliver a laboured discourse on its beauties that exist nowhere. Art, according to him, is no mere intellectual jugglery but a language of the heart and must go straight to heart in order to be effective. It must completely overwhelm its beholder, be he a child or a philosopher, a barbarian or an art connoisseur.

Portraiture and landscape painting are the two provinces where he has achieved unrivalled excellence. He has to his credit great many commissioned portraits, mostly of the ruling princes. His portrait studies of "Gandhi ji", "Netaji Bose", "Sher-i-Punjab Ranjit Singh" and "General Hari Singh Nalwa" have been widely acclaimed as masterpieces in as much as he has successfully endeavoured in them to remain faithful to the historical truth of these great persons. They have the same solid virtues which distinguish the commissioned portraits of the Royal Academicians of Britain.

In landscape painting he is essentially a lyricist. Some of his scenes can, without exaggeration, be styled as symphonies in colour. Like the Greek sculptor who could carve in stone the movement of the wind and the breeze, Thakur Singh has captured and eternized in his paintings the fleeting colours that play upon the maiden face of the awakening morn or of the retiring eve and the elusive wealth scattered by moonlight. The transporting power of his imagination is well-illustrated in his famous work "Aurora" which is the pictorial representation of dawn on sea-beach. It is like the vision of a place in the mind which one intensely desires but to which ho human path directly leads. A peep into the picture is a peep beyond the borders of the finite where all forms end and the spirit rules all in all in its naked majesty. "The Parting Kiss", another of his famous paintings, represents the icy solitudes of the Mount Everest flushed golden with the touch of the dying day. Here the Everest is no longer the awe-inspiring, inaccessible peak it is to the explorer or the scientist but a perfect vision of beauty with which the spirit of beholder can hold endless communion and share a part of its glory.

Among the architectural subjects the beauty of the Taj seems to have specially touched the tender fibres of his heart, for he has portrayed it from several angles and under various atmospheric effects, every time revealing an aspect of its sublimity and grace hitherto unrevealed in colour. The actual Taj is beautiful indeed, but the vision of it painted in "Her Last Desire" (acquired by the U.S.S.R. State Museum) under the golden rays of the evening sun, with its fairy contours fading into the surrounding air, makes it appear like the fragment of a forgotten dream.

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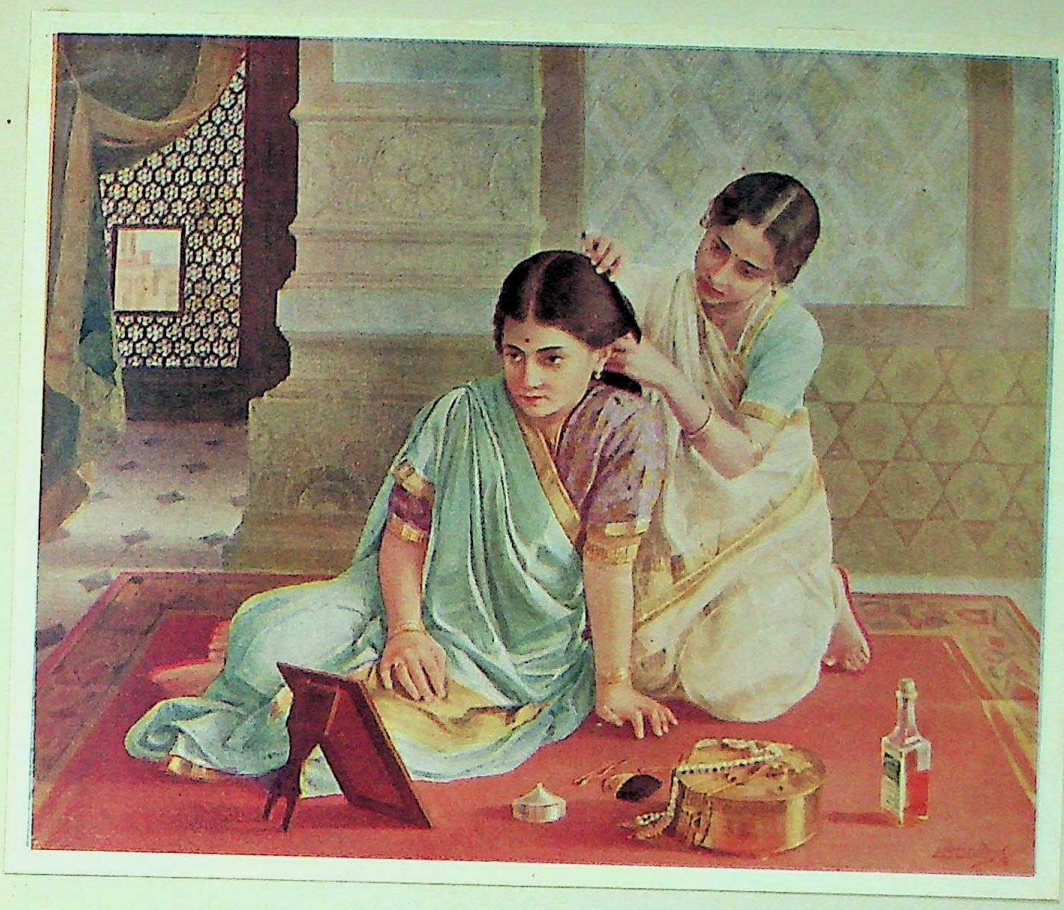

EVENING TOILET

In the present volume entitled "Paintings of Indian Womanhood" a variegated world of Indian belles comes before our view not conventional in form but throbbing with life-blood and revealing a firm individuality. Being portrait painter of a high calibre, he makes the face convincingly real and emblematic of the inner sentiments. All the figures painted here hail from middle class life, unmarred by the rigours of spiritual conflict characteristic of the lower classes or the sophistry and snobbism of the upper ones. As such his figures are endowed with a natural grace and comeliness. Having spent a major portion of his youthful life in Bengal, obviously he could not shake himself free of the impress of Bengali life and manners which are too apparent in the character of the figures and the back-ground effects against which they are painted.

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*Plate 1*

# INNOCENT CANDLE

Collection : Maharaja Bahadur Sir Prodyat Coomar Tagore, K.C.I.E., Calcutta.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 28'' X 36''

*( Signed & Dated 1936 )*

SHE is apparently a dancing girl—the irresistible Saki of the Persian poetry—in her hand a rose, the flower of love, sent her as a token by one of her numerous lovers. In her splendid dress, enriched with gold ornaments, her attitude and expression, she affords a picture of the refined type of voluptuous seductiveness.

So many moths hovering round the candle, some dying, some dead, lend the picture a meaning which is broadly suggested by the title. As the candle cannot be pronounced guilty for the eagerness of the moths to perish in its flame, so is this beautiful woman not to blame if so many hearts come to seek self-extinction at the altar of her beauty.

The dual effect of light—that of the candle and the moon—has been superbly depicted here. The artist's inborn love for detail and ornamentation finds full expression in the picture, particularly in the architectural background and the still-life study of objects in the foreground.

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*Plate 2*

# THE LOVER OF ART

Collection : H. H. The Maharaja of Pithapuram.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 28" X 36"

*( Signed & dated 1924 )*

WHEN you come and ask an artist, "What is the meaning of what you paint?" he would undoubtedly reply with Rabindra Nath Tagore, "Ah, who knows what it means !" All art begins in the realm of the superfluous which hedges langorously round the frontiers of necessity. The painter, defying all codes of miserly utility, paints for the sheer joy of creation which is comparable for its intensity only to the joy of a lover near a noble and compassionate mistress but no more definable than the feeling of love itself.

In this picture the artist has for once succeeded, by dint of all the technical devices at his command, to represent pictorially this particular spiritual state. The harmonious blending of colours and the complete relief of the figure from the background contribute, no less than the expression of the face, to the intensity of purpose and feeling and the total effect.

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*Plate 3*

# TULSI SHEWA

Collection : Private Collection

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 24'' X 36''

*( Signed & dated 1934 )*

FROM time immemorial the Tulsi plant has been considered sacred by the Hindus and its daily worship has formed an integral part of the daily religious rites of a Hindu house-wife. This simple theme, which has been variously treated by different Indian artists, has afforded the artist with an excuse to display his artistry and skill in an entirely new channel which he has exploited to its fullest measure.

The woman, fresh from her morning ablutions, comes to water the sacred plant. The wet cloth sticking to her bare body resolves itself into characteristic folds which have been very faithfully rendered. Possessing the courage of an innovator, the artist has attempted to fuse together into an individual style the clarity of Indian vision with the proportioned anatomy of the Western technique.

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*Plate 4*

# LOST LEAF

Collection : H. H. The Maharana of Udaipur.

MEDIUM : WATER COLOUR

Size : 20'' X 28''

*( Signed & dated 1928 )*

IT is the Indianised version of the "Lady of Shallot" pictorially represented here. The maiden, sheltering behind the walled security of her storeyed apartment, has been oblivious of the real world of men with its simple joys and sorrows, its sunshine and laughter. But those who have chosen to guard themselves against surprises of life, have been surprised by the eternal reality of love before which all obstacles fade into nothingness and its scorner is reduced to the humble status of its helpless bond-slave.

It is a simple but effective piece of work. A tender and delicate sentiment breathes in the picture. The piognancy of the maiden's countenance and the unaffected grace of her pose are effectively rendered.

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*Plate 5*

# INDOLENCE

Collection : H. H. The Nawab of Malerkotla.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 18'' X 24''

*( Signed & dated 1931 )*

HERE we have the sumptuously decorated interior of a room with an attractive type of feminine beauty, half-roused from her sleep but still chewing the cud of some beautiful love dream she has experienced, and is loth to return to the world of consciousness and harsh reality.

The artist deserves credit for its technical excellence, the firm and realistic painting of the figure, and extremely effective management of light and shade. There is a typically Oriential quality in the linear rhythms which flow and converge into no loose ends. The picture expresses with utmost force the artist's mind in a land of variegated colour and light. He presents the human figure as a pattern which arouses no ordinary human responses but that rare state of satisfaction which is styled as æsthetic emotion.

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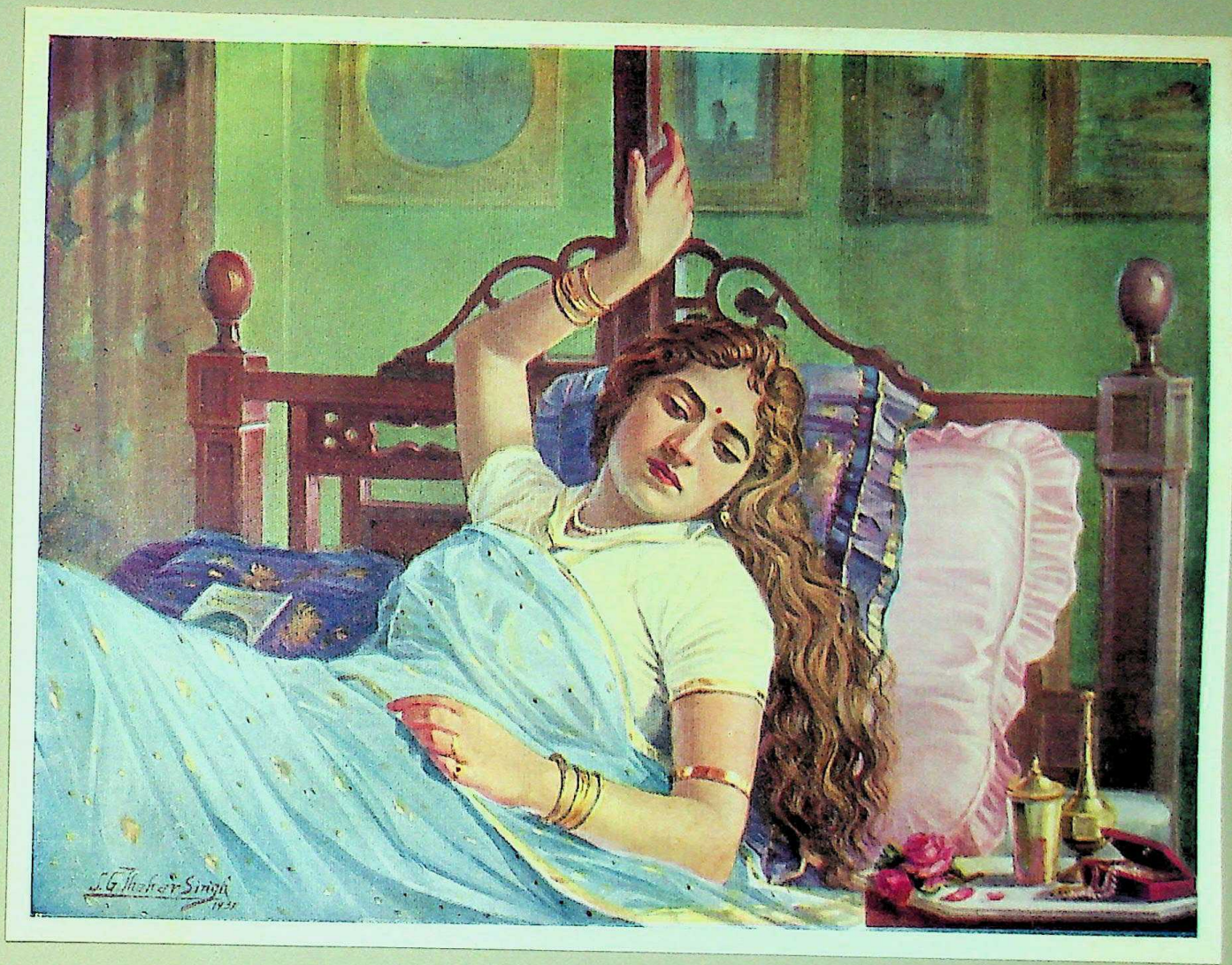

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*Plate 6*

# FINISHING TOUCH

Collection : H. H. The Maharao of Dungarpore.

MEDIUM : WATER COLOUR

Size : 24'' X 30''

*( Signed & dated 1927 )*

IT forms a part of the picturesque routine of a middle class Bengali house wife that after her morning ablutions and daily worship, she indulges in an elaborate toiletting, the last item of which consists in marginning the soles of her feet with a specially prepared red colour indigenously termed "Alaktaka" which is the subject matter of this painting.

The artist spent a greater part of his youthful years in the thick of Bengali life. Hence it is that he brings to bear his facile-brush in painting the different facets of Bengali manners and customs with such a perfect fidelity and ease. Much of the artist's productiveness has been in the line of decorative subjects for which his taste and talent peculiarly fit him. Unlike most of the modern artists, he does not mince matters but works to perfection in minutest details. The mild light stealing into the interior from the ante-room, the flowing curtain and the detailed patterns on the wall — all bespeak of his innate sense of realism.

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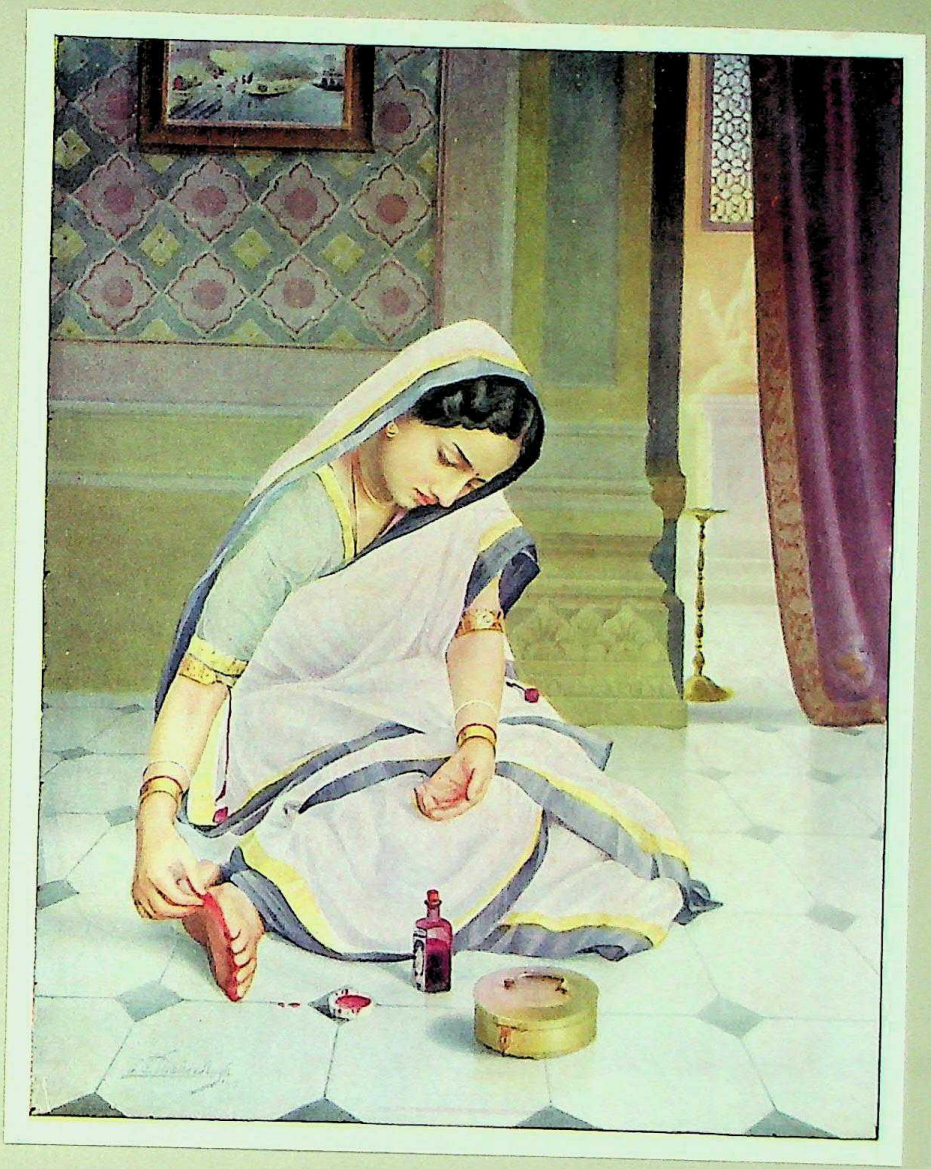

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*Plate 7*

# MORNING DREAM

Collection : H. H. The Maharaja of Pithapuram.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 18'' X 24''

*( Signed & dated 1925 )*

LIFE was passing its diurnal round through the period of infancy, and then of girlhood, with a pace wearisomely smooth and leisurely slow. It was all a dull, humdrum affair. But one wonderful morning, with the vernal buds aching into bloom, there came a sudden awakening, a revelation that youth had come at last—youth, the golden period of life, and with it the erstwhile drab, colourless world was transformed into a land of enchantment and magic. Life had at last found its meaning, its ultimate purpose.

This is the theme of this picture, and in it, as in several others of this category in this volume, the artist reveals his fine gift of rendition of tone and colour. He seems to have a particular propensity for painting ripe, sensuous type of womanhood. Here the ripening beauty of the maiden is relieved by the rhythmic folds of the garment, and the luxuriously patterned walls of her sleeping parlour.

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*Plate 8*

# THE SECRET LETTER

Collection : Private Collection

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 18'' X 24''

( *Signed & dated 1930* )

LIFE grows glorious only with the dawning of love in the heart. As spring invests the gloomy forest with the magic of flower and foliage, so does love transform the lonely, stagnant days of a maiden's life into the divine splendour of beauty and youth.

The young maiden, for whom the artist has his own sister for the model, receives the long-awaited letter from her far-away love and she retires into a secure niche where undisturbed she might suck honey from the flowers of love which the words in the letter certainly are for her ! The heavy and oppressive gloom in the background suggestive of the sad state of her mind is invaded by the happy memories of love symbolised by the light and flowers in the foreground. Her face, serene and aristocratic and imbued with innocent integrity, exhibits a grace of posture which dignifies everything about her.

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*Plate 9*

# TORMENTS OF LOVE

Collection : H. H. The Maharaja of Patiala.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 20" X 28"

*( Signed & dated 1930 )*

IT emphasises all that is best in the artist, his rich deep and harmonious colouring, command of character and form, and solidity of execution. Often he indulges in triumphs of colour which he carries here to a unique pitch of splendour.

This picture tells the story more forcefully than even words can do. In the midst of life's absorbing activities, her mind suddenly travels to the far-away land of love where the lotus of hope blooms resplendent and her mind is torn with the pain of love and the burning desire of union.

The imagery is intended to symbolise her agitated state of mind. The darker shade before her in contrast to the lighter one behind reminds one of the saddest lines that Shakespeare ever wrole : "My grief lies onward and my joy behind."

The picture is so realistically painted that one almost feels the turbulent life-blood running under her smooth flesh.

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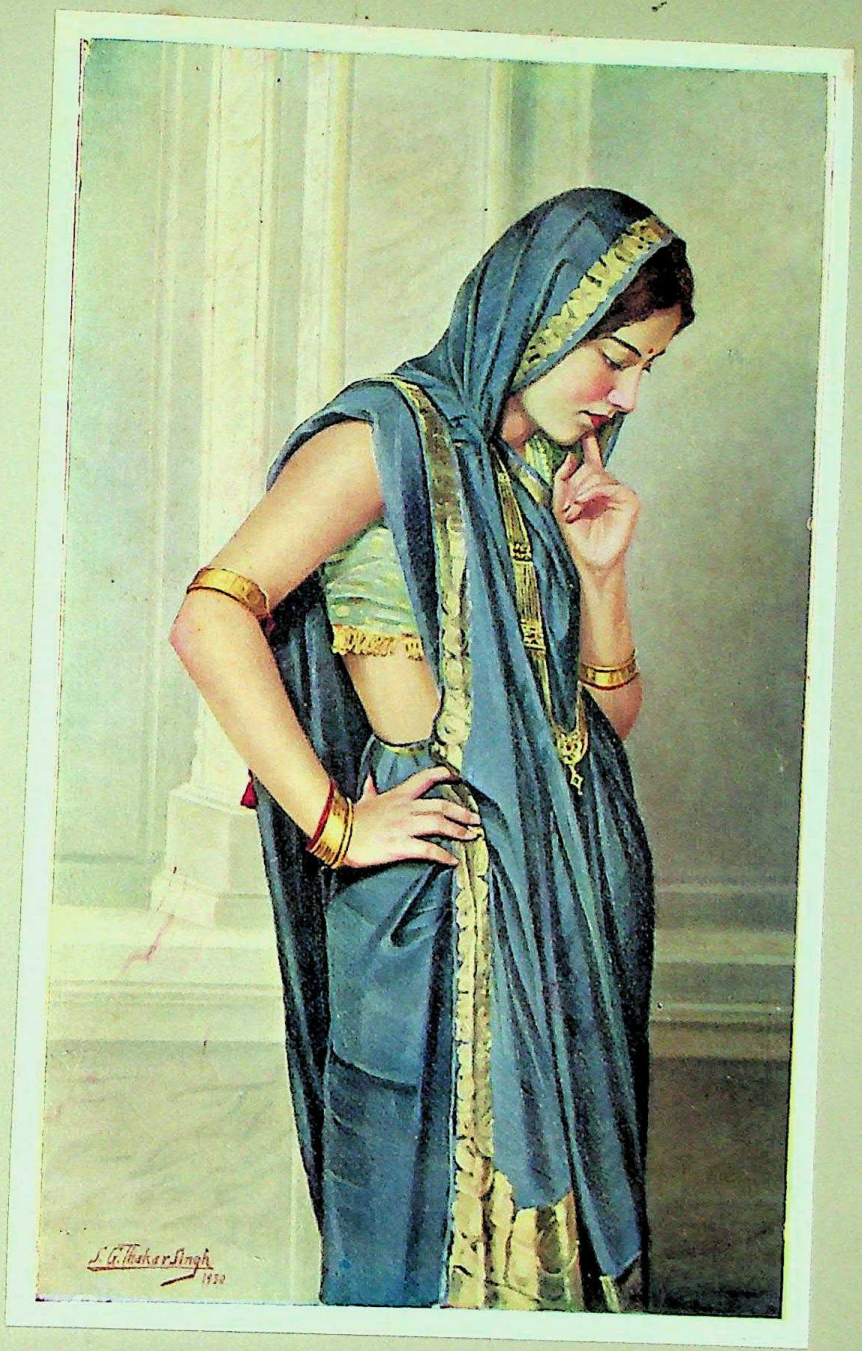

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*Plate 10*

# GANESH PUJA

Collection : H. E. M. S. Aney, Governor of Bihar.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 20'' X 28''

*( Signed & dated 1931 )*

THE subject of this painting and that of Plate No. 11 is the same but reveals the entirely two different aspects of human nature with respect to our devotional attitude to our highest Deity. Here the artist reveals that rituals, which form a part of religious worship, are, in fact, its unnecessary appendages, which thwart rather than aid it real end. It is the direct communion of human spirit with the Universal Spirit that alone can lift it up to the higher plane of self-realization.

The worship of Ganesh—the elephant god—prevails in many parts of India. The lady standing before the god is completely lost to the external world. The expression of devotion and earnestness on her face is faithfully rendered. The classical folds of the draperies, and the architectural background, entirely Indian in spirit, lend it an added charm.

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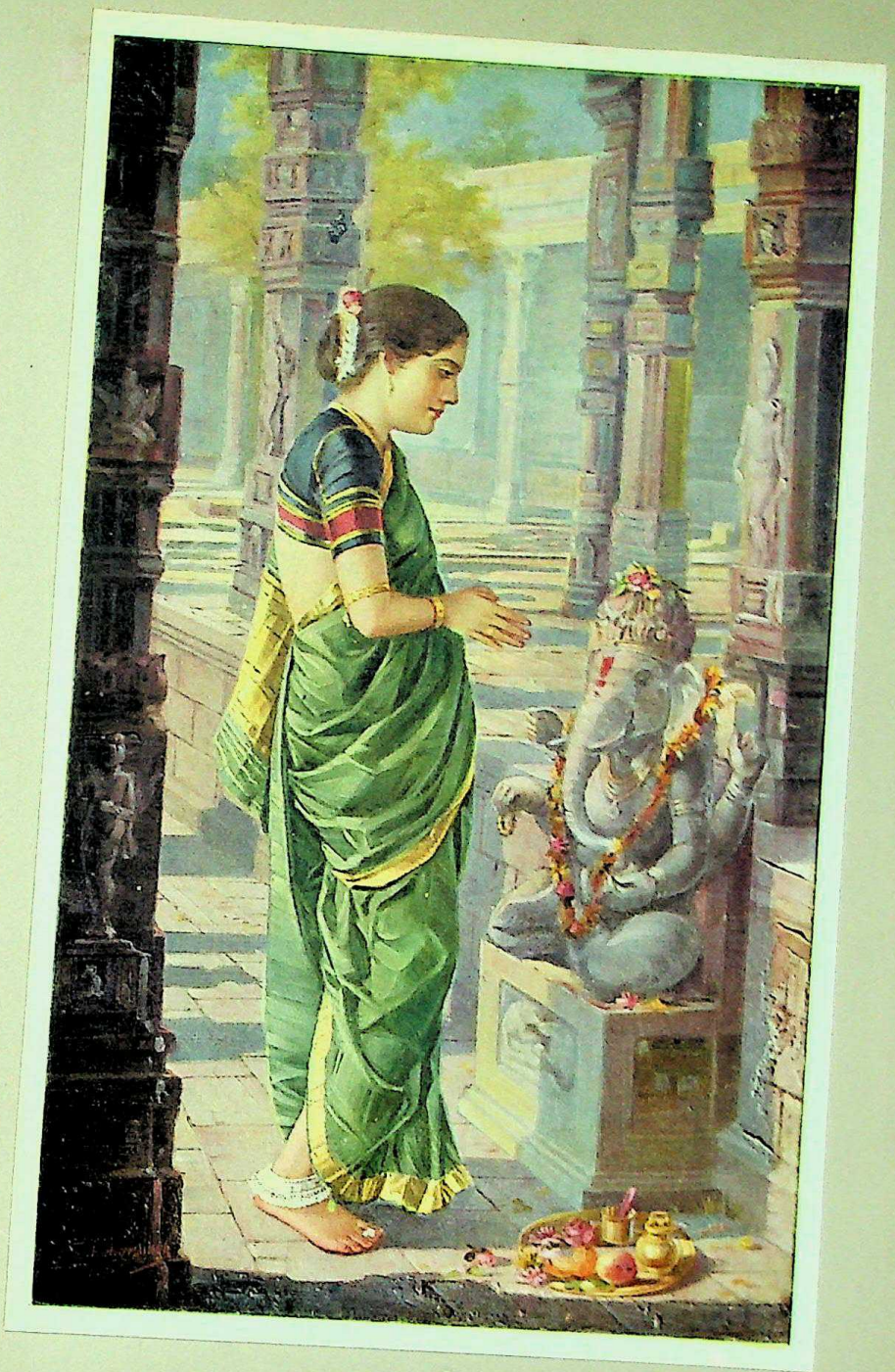

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*Plate 11*

# AT THE TEMPLE DOOR

Collection : S. Nand Singh, Prop. Punjabee Press, Delhi.

MEDIUM : OIL

Size : 20'' X 28''

( *Signed & dated 1922* )

IT is a pretty picture, beautifully drawn and ably executed. It is a proof of the artist's firm modelling and his command over textural accessories. Actuated by his innate sense of realism, he has eliminated sentiment from it and objectivised it completely. Here he has represented a coquettish woman in the role of a pseudo-devotee. Except for the temple door in the background and votive flowers in her hand, there is nothing in her attitude and expression to suggest the devotional zeal that distinguishes a true devotee. Her affected pose, the finish of her toilet, and the conscious display of her meticulously-arranged ornaments belie her role.

It is a bold departure, but not inconsistent in an age when materialism has well-nigh eclipsed the spirit of religion, leaving only soulless rituals behind.

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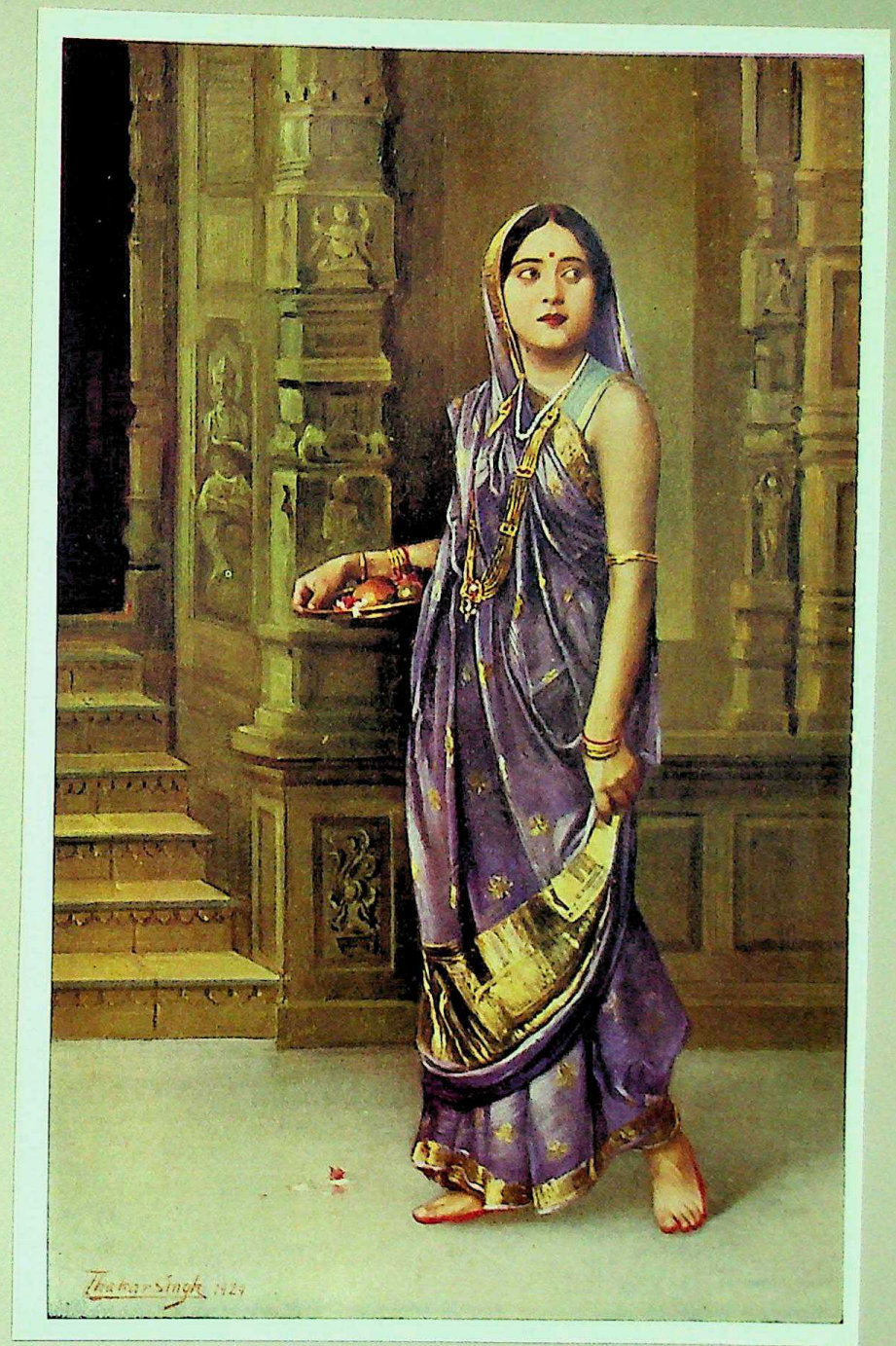

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*Plate 12*

# AFTER BATH

Collection : H. H. The Maharaja of Patiala.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 24'' X 36''

*Signed & dated 1924 (2nd Reproduction)*

THIS picture, for which the artist received Second Prize in the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, and which brought him sudden fame and recognition, is distinguished by a high degree of technical competence. The tones of the flesh where it is bare, and where the wet and dripping garment clings close to the body, are graded with a discriminating colour sense and the characteristic pose brings out exquisitely the grace of the feminine figure.

It is customary with Indian women, more particularly in Bengal, to go for votive offerings to a nearby temple and, on their return, to have a dip int he tank attached to the temple with the upper garment still wrapped round the body. This has provided the artist with a subject upon which he has profusely lavished his skill.

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*Plate 13*

# REFLECTION

Collection : H. H. The Maharana of Udaipur.

MEDIUM : WATER COLOUR

Size 20'' X 28''

*( Signed & dated 1928 )*

"REFLECTION in the Mirror" is a typical work of the artist. It represents a young Bengali lady, who after embellishing her person to faultless perfection, contemplates herself in the hand mirror, and arrives at the irresistible conclusion that she is as beautiful as she wishes herself to be, and her mild smile displays the confidence about her ability to overpower her elusive lover with the spell of her compelling charm.

The heavily-brocaded garments glitter in the light and add to the charm of her face. Realism is deftly tempered with delicate taste, while the well-balanced light and shade and the harmony of the colours used make the picture a work of rare beauty.

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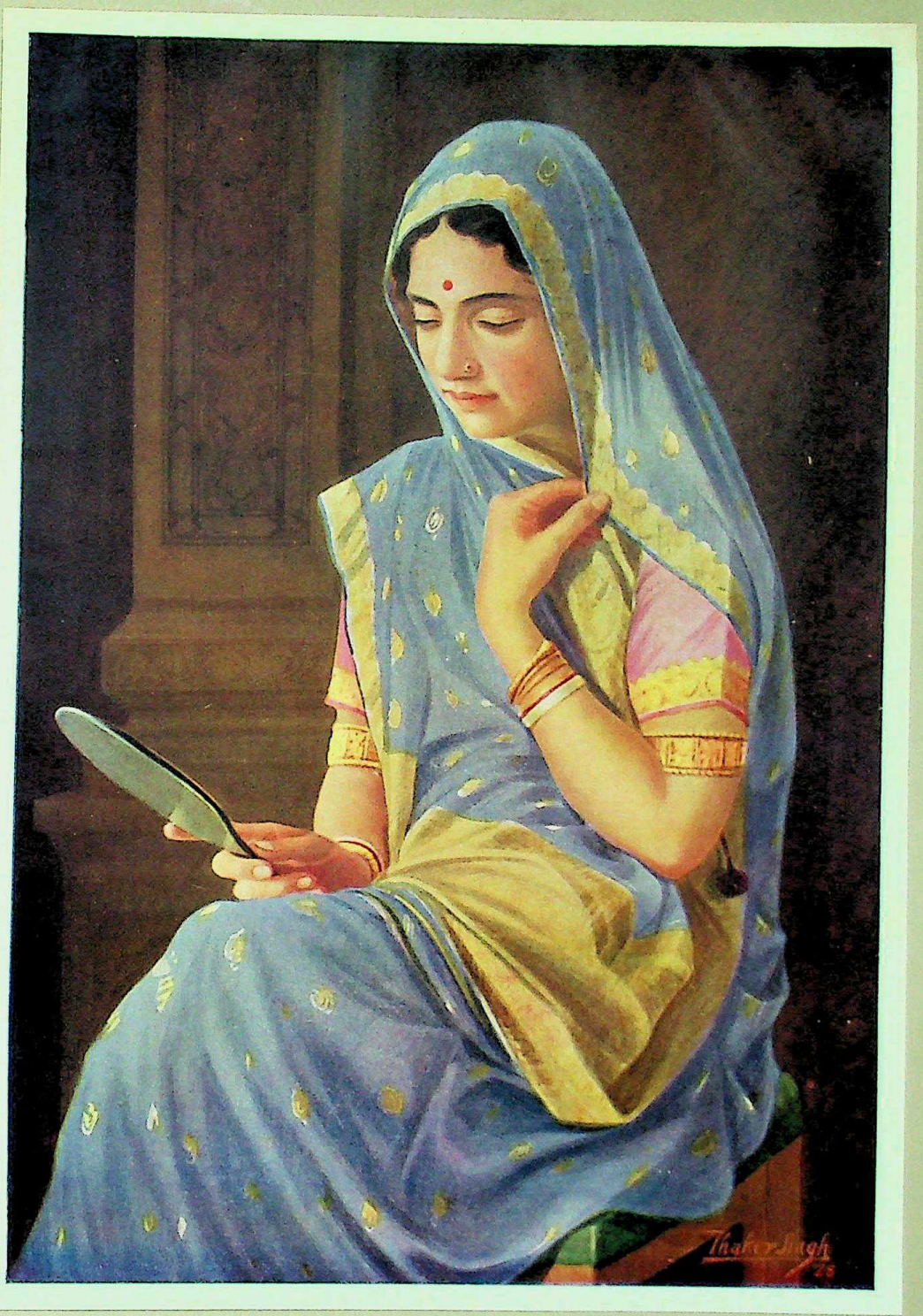

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*Plate 14*

# EVENING TOILET

Collection : H. H. The Maharana of Udaipur.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas : 28'' X 36''

( *Signed & dated 1923* )

WOMAN is Maya incarnate, the golden Illusion in the path of man to captivate his heart and to rouse him into miracles of valour. Her function in Creation has been to be "the centre of order, the balm of distress and the mirror of beauty." And she has worked incessantly towards that end fulfilling the Creator's ordained purpose ever since the dawn of Creation. Where woman comes in man's life, there comes art, and she makes his otherwise barren and desolate existence a paradise of beauty. The artist has touched this eternal theme in this painting in which the technical essentials of his art, the balanced composition, drawing and expressive directness of brush work, are amply in evidence.

The suggestion of seriousness with which the decorative task is being pursued is conveyed with a subtlety that is wonderfully persuasive in the posing of the figures and the expressions on the two faces.

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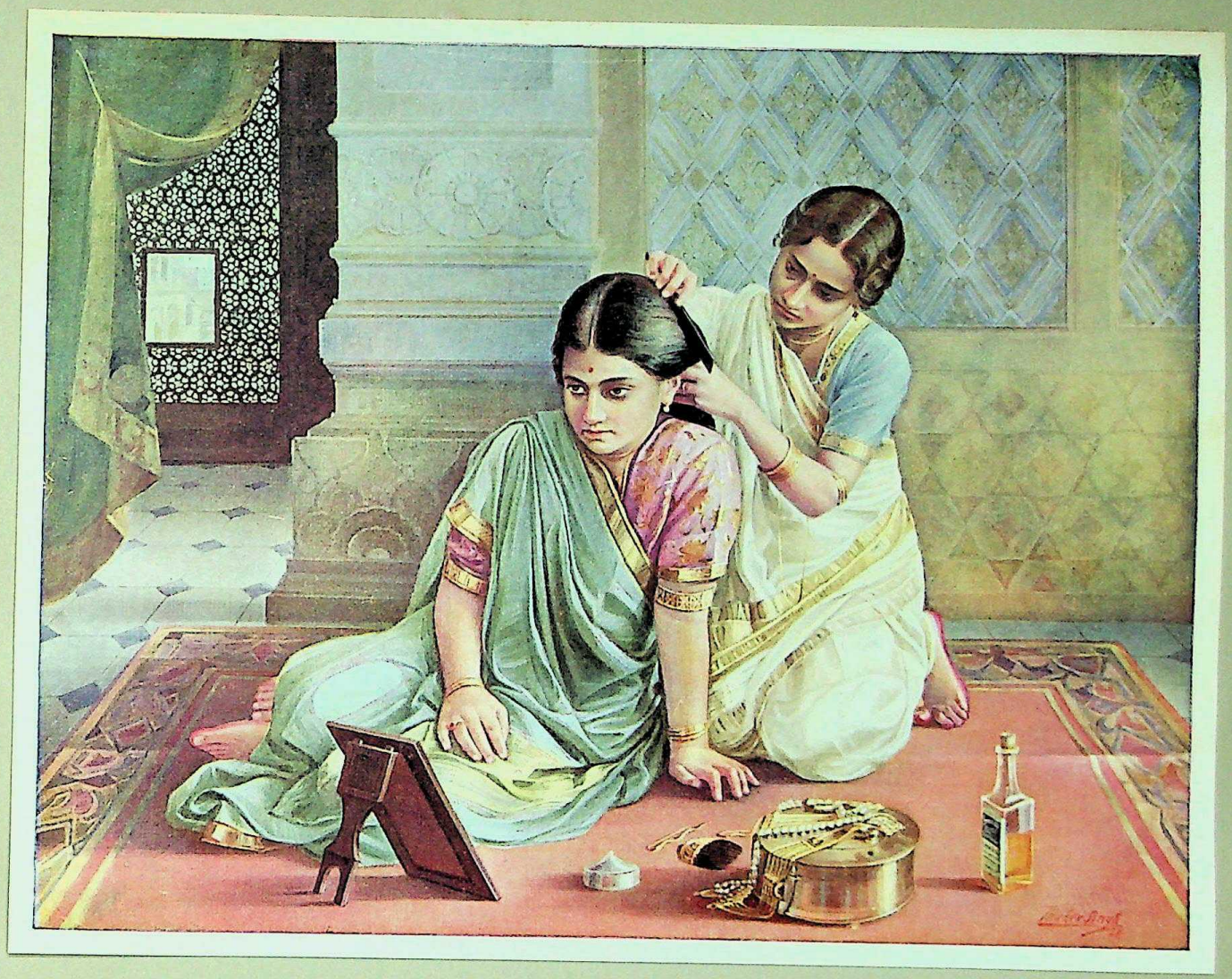

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*Plate 15*

# MONAJAT

Collection : Sir A. Rahim, Calcutta.

MEDIUM : OIL

Canvas 18" X 24"

*( Signed & dated 1922 )*

THE subject of this painting is a noble-minded, devout Muslim lady. During one of her daily recitals of the Holy Quran, her mind, of a sudden, is captured by a Divine Vision, ineffably beautiful, and she falls into a trance. The world of the Spirit is not far-off but hovers unseen around us only to be visualised, more palpably than reality itself, through reverence, simplicity and love. But "the world is too much with us" and, lost as we are in its hollow and unmeaning glitter, we cannot partake of mystic experiences which alone can open before us the golden road to bliss.

The tranquil solitude, the mysterious effect of light and shade very dexterously manipulated, the vague effect of the architectural background and, above all, the characteristic pose of the figure, tend to create a consciousness of Divine Presence.

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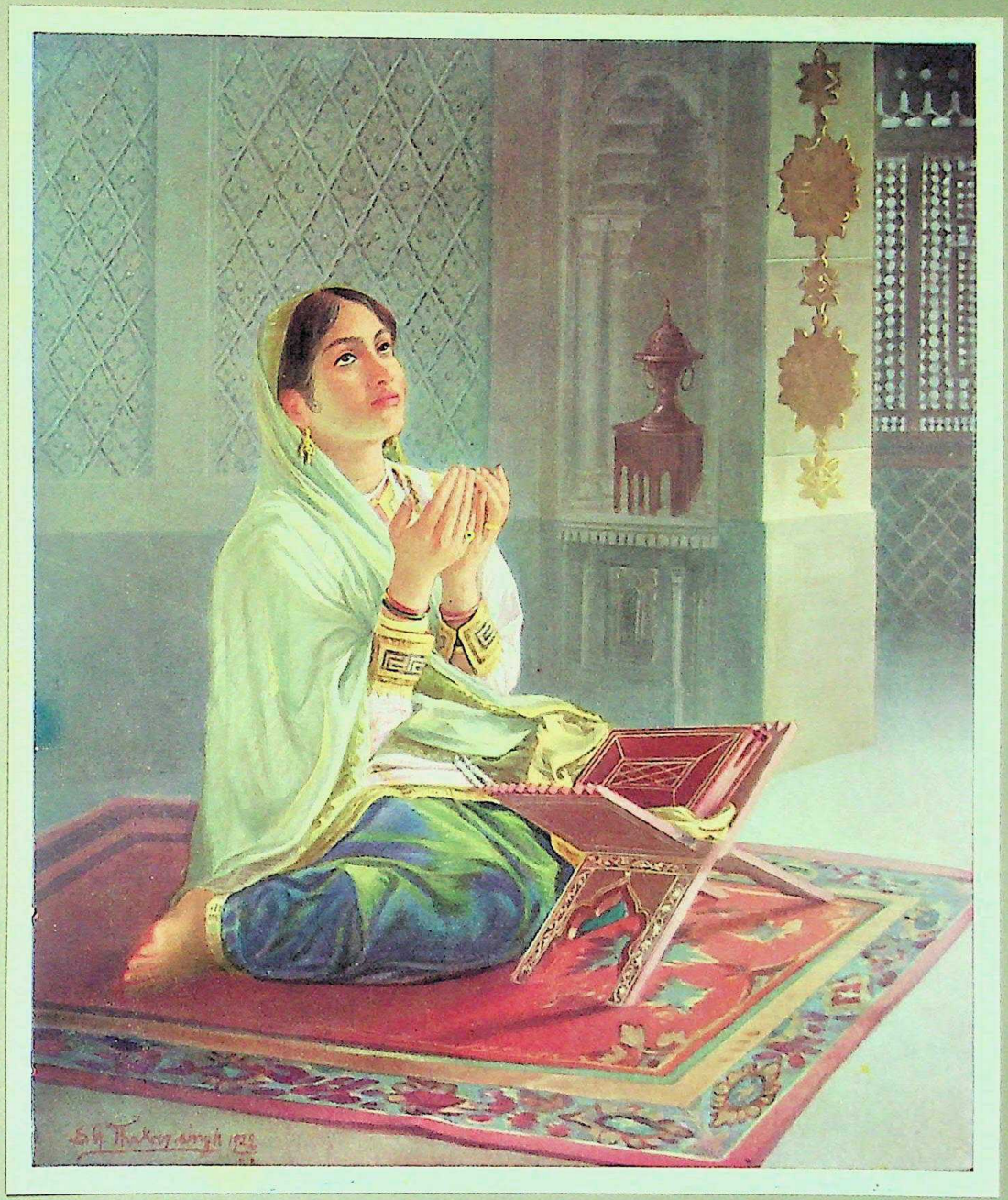

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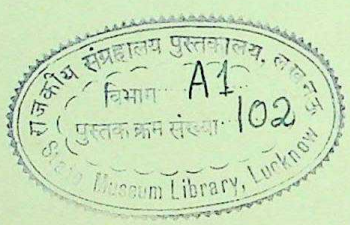

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